

WALNUT PARK  
Petaluma Boulevard and D Street  
Petaluma  
Sonoma County  
California

HALS CA-28  
CA-28

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### WALNUT PARK

HALS NO. CA-28

- Location: Petaluma Blvd. and D Street, Petaluma, Sonoma County, Mendocino, CA  
Lat: 38.2319439 Long: -122.636518
- Significance: Walnut Park was the second park established in the town of Petaluma, CA and appears to meet National Register Criteria A and C. It is significant in the categories of social history, landscape architecture, recreation, and in community planning and development. It is associated with the Parks Movement, with the Women's Improvement Clubs movements, with the Temperance Movement and the Playgrounds Movement. It is also associated with early settlers and important figures in Petaluma, including John McNear, Professor Edward S. Lippitt, Mrs. H. H. Atwater, Miss Rena Shattuck, and Brainerd Jones.
- Description: Walnut Park is located on the edge of the historic section of downtown Petaluma and takes up a full city block. There are diagonal asphalt paths at each corner which terminate near the center of the park where there is a band stand and an enclosed playground, all surrounded by asphalt paths. Areas not devoted to the play area or the pathways is planted with lawn and with walnut trees, which are on a grid pattern throughout the park. One exception is a sycamore tree, which is located near the northeast corner. On the east side of the playground is a stucco structure originally designed for use as a children's play room and restrooms; it still contains restrooms but the play room has been converted to park staff use. Wood and metal park benches and picnic tables, painted green, are located throughout the park.
- The octagonal band stand is about three feet above grade and has a concrete base, concrete columns, and a concrete roof with recessed lights and is coated with a metal roof. Iron rails mark the edge of the structure. The play area is demarcated by a low wall made of concrete masonry units. Colorful metal and plastic premanufactured climbing and play equipment fills the sand-floored area. The storage structure is single story stucco with a bas-relief squirrel over the front door.
- History: Fourteen years after the town was founded, the City Trustees purchased the land for Walnut Park. An important local businessman, John McNear, generously donated half the purchase price of the lot, \$1,250.00. The site was referred to variously as the lower plaza or the D Street plaza. Three years later, in 1876, local educator Professor Edward S. Lippitt provided a plan for the park. Contemporary newspaper accounts state that 76 trees were purchased, but it seems that Lippitt's plan was only partially implemented and local efforts to plant and care for the

park came and went. Even though there was no plan in place to care for the plaza, 100 walnut trees were planted in the park in 1886.

On May 28, 1896 the Ladies' Improvement Club was formed with the express purpose of improving the two forlorn plazas in town, with a hope that they could be made presentable for Independence Day celebrations. The Ladies' Improvement Club is an excellent example of the many clubs of the era that were started by women with the express purpose of improving the social and physical surroundings of towns and cities.

Miss Rena Shattuck was a local author who hosted the first meeting of the Ladies' Improvement Club and who, along with Mrs. H.H. Atwater, steered and directed the club. Mrs. Atwater, a resourceful and influential woman and president of the Improvement Club, took charge of the workers in Walnut Park. Soon the park was organized, planted, and furnished with benches. It is not clear if the paths were in place, but it seems likely that the Ladies' Improvement Club is responsible for the overall design, still present today. Soon the plaza was christened by the club as Walnut Park. It's not clear how long the club was responsible for maintaining the parks, but a parks commission and permanent funding for parks was not in place until 1911.

A tank house and windmill were added in 1899. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had a hand in the parks, supporting the Ladies' Improvement Club and donating parts for a fountain in Walnut Park (California Ladies' Magazine). An elaborate fountain can be seen at the edge of one old photo. The fountain was removed sometime prior to 1960.

1941 the tank house and windmill was replaced by the current building designed by Brainerd Jones, Petaluma's most prominent architect. Plans show a pump house and boys and girls bathrooms. There was also a small indoor playroom, reflecting the idea in that era that parks should provide many kinds of activities for children, including supervised crafts and games.

In 1927 the Petaluma Lions Club installed the band stand that is located in the center of the park. During the opening ceremony, tribute was paid to the Ladies' Improvement Club, and particularly Miss Rena Shattuck and Mrs. H. H. Atwater. Camp Fire Girls planted a "splendid" sycamore to mark the occasion. (That failing sycamore was replaced in 1995 to mark the occasion of the retirement of Ed Anchordoguy from his position as city parks and landscape manager.)

The band stand was a huge success, with weekly concerts drawing crowds of people. It was the custom for music lovers who owned cars to gather at the perimeter of the park and sit in their cars to enjoy the music, honking their horns at the end of each selection. Two years later the Petaluma Lions club installed several large benches around the band stand to assure sufficient seating "for those

who do not have cars in which to sit and hear the music.” Music concerts continued for some years. A plaque commemorating local soldiers who died in the Vietnam War was installed in recent times.

Several decaying walnut trees, the sorry recipients of poor pruning practices in years past, were replaced in 2005.

Sources: Ladies are Busy, Work of the Petaluma Ladies Improvement Club. Santa Rosa Democrat, Feb. 15, 1899.

Minutes of the Ladies' Improvement Club for 1896.

Various articles from the Petaluma Argus and Petaluma Daily Courier newspapers, later merged to form the Petaluma Argus Courier: 11/14/1873, 1/28/1876, 6/14/1878, 1/13/1886, 4/4/1893, 9/9/1896, 10/5/1899, 8/25/1910, 6/8/1927, 6/28/1929, 4/20/2005

Historic photographs and postcards located at the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum and at the Petaluma History Room in the Sonoma County Library

Historian: Janet Gracyk, Landscape Architect, May 10, 2009  
Terra Cognita Design and Consulting  
145 Keller Street  
Petaluma, CA 94952  
gracyk707@gmail.com



The park bandstand at the terminus of the path with the play area visible to the right (Janet Gracyk, May 6, 2008).



An undated historic postcard of the park sometime after the work of the Ladies' Improvement Club, showing wide paths, many trees, and the donated benches (Petaluma Historical Library and Museum).